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PART II

FOOD AND DRINK

CHAPTER III

NATIVE VIEWS ON FOOD

Food as a Centre of Interest.

521 FOOD and beer are without doubt the most exciting and interesting topics of native conversation, with the exception of money, in areas affected by white contact. Any one who can follow the ordinary gossip of a Bemba village will be struck at once by the endless talk shouted from hut to hut as to what is about to be eaten, what has already been eaten, and what lies in store for the future, and this with an animation and a wealth of detail which would be thought quite unusual in this country. It is, of course, natural in an area where the supply is never constant from day to day that the daily meal should be a subject of vivid interest. For those who are accustomed to buy food ready prepared, it is difficult to realize the emotional attitudes to foodstuffs among peoples who are directly dependent on their environment for their diet. Most of their food the Bemba grow, and hence they view their fields and gardens concretely in terms of their future prospects of food and drink. These they constantly discuss. I timed two old women talking over an hour on the single topic of the probable order of ripening of the pumpkins in three gardens, and the way in which they were likely to be distributed. The question evidently dominated their imagination. I have visited millet fields, near harvest time, and heard the owner exclaim ecstatically, 'Just look at all that beer!' Foods collected from the bush, animal or vegetable, are perhaps of even greater interest because of the element of luck in their discovery. A sudden find of caterpillars or mushrooms, or a fish caught by hand in the reeds of a swamp, will be discussed all over the village that night.

521 The European notices, too, that the natives tend to describe
●823 their actual environment and the passage of the seasons in terms of the dietetic changes associated with them. They talk of different parts of the country according to their food deficiencies as 'where

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they only eat pumpkin leaves', i.e. where game is short and the people have to rely on vegetable relishes. They refer to a visit to a village on a big river as, 'He has gone to eat fish with So-and-So.' The fortunes of each district are discussed year by year and villages described as 'with hunger' (*pa nsala*) or the converse, 'with beer' (*pa bwalua*), i.e. with so much grain that they can make beer frequently. The seasonal changes in food, and the stages in its production, give their names to the periods of the year. While a definite calendar of moons exists (cf. Chap. XVIII) the Bemba more often time events as having taken place 'in the hunger months', i.e. the last months of the rains when the millet supply is low; or 'when we were eating mushrooms', 'when the *mupundu* fruit was ripe', and 'when we were reaping, sowing', &c., and the ages of babies are usually reckoned by dating their births in this manner.

The position of the Bemba traveller, dependent as he is on the hazards of hospitality, provides a further element of uncertainty. The correct greeting to one who has returned from a journey is *Mwalyeni bwino*, 'Have you eaten well?' To which the courteous reply is *Kulila mulelya*, 'Provided you have eaten well yourself', or *E Mukwai kufipwishya*, 'Yes, sir, I eat everything up completely', or else *Fia kwa cilime bafipwa kano wa kulapo yanda*, 'It would have been impossible to finish up all the crops unless you had built a house alongside', i.e. it was so plentiful. There is a regular form of magic used to ensure a guest's arrival before a meal has been finished and not after. A knot tied in the grass with the right formula repeated will secure this result, and I found my staff even performed this rite on my own behalf if at all doubtful as to my reception on a visit to unknown English hosts.

Besides this direct interest in the food he is going to eat in the day, or the beer he may have the luck to come in time for, the secondary values acquired by food give it an added emotional interest to the Bemba. It must be remembered that there is no other way of accumulating wealth in this area except by acquiring sufficient food to feed many followers. The giving or receipt of food is a part of most economic transactions, and may come to represent a number of human relationships whether between different kinsmen or between subject and chief. For this reason the whole question of handling or dividing food acquires tremendous emotional significance for the native, and discussions of personalities or legal relationships tend to be ultimately expressed in this

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123 and a good many experiments are actually made in the course of an individual's life. Where soil selection depends on accumulated experience, as it must do among shifting cultivators, this is especially the case, and a man could make many agricultural blunders between youth and manhood if he were acting alone. His type of education and system of co-operation in gardening prevent him from doing so to a certain extent. And it is for this reason that individual differences in agricultural skill, leadership, and the way in which economic knowledge is handed on to the next generation are facts of importance from an agricultural point of view.

The basis of the Bemba system of domestic co-operation has already been described (Chap. VIII), but it will be necessary to study the village and kinship groups as agricultural units and to estimate as far as possible the labour force required for each particular process and its relation to the cycle of other activities—political, religious, domestic, or recreational—which go to make up the daily or seasonal routine. The problem of diet in relation to the labour supply is obviously of particular importance in an area with such a large proportion of adult males away.

General Attitude to Land.

●823 A group of Bemba walking from place to place through their tribal territory view surroundings from an entirely different standpoint from our own. Different objects excite their interest and admiration, and they comment on the scenes they pass through in different terms. This general attitude of the people towards their environment is important to describe. It expresses the line of their economic interests, and ultimately determines the legal rules by which their land is used.

823 311 Now the main aim of the Bemba cultivator is to grow as much millet as possible in any one year, and millet gardens are made by cutting off tree-tops and burning their branches. For this reason, when walking through the bush the Bemba are constantly on the watch for many and high trees. To these natives the whole stretch of land is in a sense one unit. It is all 'bush' (*mpanga*), and all potentially cultivateable. The differences between productive and unproductive soil, in their eyes, is the presence or absence of trees.

824 What the European regards as yet another stretch of monotonous bush is to the Bemba a possible garden site. Trees are the ultimate source of his food-supply. More than this, they are the means by which all the MATERIAL equipment of his life is secured,

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talk, but he had registered the memory for future use. He had, in fact, a vivid, if entirely selective, interest in the vegetation around him. 222

The natives' passionate enthusiasm for hunting adds another interest to their travel through the bush. To them the countryside can be roughly classified according to the type of game that is found there, and in ordinary speech the people describe an area by saying, for instance, that it is a land of elephants or hippos, or that it is a lechwe or reed-buck district. But apart from an interest based very largely on their craving for meat, the Bemba seem fascinated, like other African peoples, by the characteristic appearance and habits of the animals themselves—the fantastic size of the elephant, the laugh of the hyena, the ferocity of the lion or the crocodile. The hunter tracking his quarry through the bush is plainly keyed to a pitch of concentration watching for every sign of its tracks, but men and women simply travelling from one village to another will also seek for traces of game of any sort, just from their interest in the habits of the animals themselves. The different species of fish have not the same fascination for the majority of the Bemba, although they form quite an important source of food. But they seem deeply interested in the rivers of their country. They compare the value of different chieftainships, not only in terms of the game in each particular district, but also of its supplies of fish. Rivers are among the most striking landmarks in this country and form the natural boundaries of chiefs' territories. Each tributary stream, however small, has its name which is used to define the position of different villages in the neighbourhood, while the bigger rivers seem to be a source of aesthetic delight, though perhaps merely as the potential source of so much food. I noticed on different trips that carriers spoke with real enthusiasm of the size of any large river that we were about to reach, and I have heard the natives from one district compare their rivers braggingly with those of other areas. A knowledge of the exact course of different rivers is only gradually acquired by a travelled man and is much admired. I once heard a group of children under 12 arguing hotly as to the order in which different local streams flowed into the Manshya river nearby. The discussion became so heated that a series of bets were arranged as to the results. It was characteristic of a tribe with few material possessions that the wager should consist of a stated

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number of slaps, to be given by the winner and accepted by the loser!

This question of the general economic and aesthetic interests of the native in his environment needs to be discussed at the outset. It lies at the root of the fundamental difference in outlook between the European and the Bantu with regard to land. The Bemba does not measure land, assess its value in size or productive capacity, or conceive of this value as a figure to be permanently maintained at a given figure by the expenditure of effort and capital. He views the country round him as all one unit, all accessible to him, and all ready to supply his needs—trees to be used for wood, ash for his gardens, building material or medicines, and wild plants, game and fish for food. Whether or not he succeeds in wresting a living from the *mpanga* depends on his constant and intent observation of his surroundings, his traditional knowledge, and, the next important factor to be considered, the help of supernatural powers.

Land and Supernatural Blessings.

The Bemba believe that the *mpanga* is under the influence of supernatural beings, the spirits (*imipashi*) of dead chiefs who reigned over the country, or of the ancestors of the headmen in charge of individual villages. They conceive of the bush as a whole, yielding or withholding its produce according to the good or ill will of supernatural powers. The garden of an individual Bemba may fail owing to his own folly, or the hostile magic used against him, but it is a calamity more to be feared that the *mpanga* itself may refuse its spoils. It is obvious that where a people's livelihood depends to any extent on uncultivated plants, fish, or game, the element of uncertainty must actually be pronounced, and the Bemba believe that this 'luck of the bush' is in the hands of ancestral spirits to grant or withhold at will. When a native uses the word *ukushyuka*, 'to be lucky', or its opposite *ukushyama*, he may do so casually in general conversation, just as we sometimes speak laughingly of fortune having been for us or against us on any special occasion. More often, however, he uses the words in a more serious sense, which may cause him to lower his tone or look around to see if he is being overheard. Spoken in this manner, *ukushyama*, 'to be unlucky', means to be an individual who has, either by breaking a tribal code, or failing in some cere-

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361 To conclude then, we are dealing with a tribe in which residence is never fixed in one exact locality, whether for the community or for the individual, but in which we find, almost paradoxically, a deep sentimental attachment to different parts of the country—either because they are being used, or have been used, as human habitations, because of their historical significance, or else their association with supernatural beliefs. We are describing a people living in a sparsely populated country, in which there would seem to be no sound economic reason why a community should settle in one spot rather than another. But the choice is not in fact unlimited. It depends on directly sociological factors such as membership of a kinship group and acceptance of a political allegiance, a belief as to the sphere of influence of certain supernatural beings, and lastly the factors, which we must now consider, the tribal rights as to the use of land.

Divisions of Land.

423 Europeans living in Northern Rhodesia often declare that the Bemba have no system of land tenure, and at first sight there is a good deal to be said for this point of view. A new-comer to the country notices at once the lack of boundaries between the garden beds round a village. As he travels through the bush he cannot avoid being struck by the apparently haphazard way in which natives sometimes start to make gardens, cut a few trees, and then abandon the site, and by the fact that they do not even mark out the limits of the space they mean to clear in any one year. The observer will also notice that in the course of ordinary conversation no Bemba lists among his assets his possession or occupation of a given tract of land. Few disputes as to the ownership of land or its rights of use appear before the courts, and the question does not usually figure in contested inheritances.

But because the land problem is not so acute in this area, as it is in many parts of present-day Africa, we cannot conclude that there are no tribal rights as to its use, and in fact from some points of view it is even more important to discover the exact relation of man to land among a population of shifting cultivators, than it is in a tribe where the rules of ownership are more formalized.

423 To begin with, how is the land initially subdivided?
631 *Icalo.* The biggest division recognized is the *i-calo* (plur.
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i-fyalo). This is a term applied to the whole of the Bemba territory, but also used to describe the district under the rule of a particular chief. The Paramount and the territorial chiefs under him, such as Mwamba, Nkula, Nkolemfumu, Mpepo, Cikwanda, &c., each rule over a tract of country with more or less definite boundaries, which has its own name dating back to the very early days of the Bemba occupation.[1] Each of these districts is known as the *icalo* of such-and-such a chief. Some are sub-divided into smaller districts under the rule of a sub-chief. Thus the *icalo* may be defined as a political division, and its inhabitants have a certain economic unity since they all pay tribute to the one chief and expect to receive help, supernatural or material, from him.

Mpanga, the word used for 'bush', is also sometimes applied in a more restricted sense to mean the area immediately surrounding a headman's village, that is to say the few miles between one small stream and the next. The *bakabilo* or hereditary councillors of the Paramount, claim to be owners of their *mpanga* by right of descent from the first holders of their titles, who were appointed to the district by the first Citimukulu. Therefore they may not move their village beyond the distance between one river and the next. They claim supernatural powers over the area, and in some cases may prevent the chief from being carried through it.[2] But in the case of an ordinary headman the term *mpanga yandi* hardly means more than 'the neighbourhood of my village'.

Mpanga may also mean the strip of bush between one open marshy place and the next. This country is so well watered that a traveller along an inter-village path passes one tiny stream after another at intervals of four to five miles, and the Bemba make a rough calculation of distance by this means. 'We shall pass three *mpanga* and camp at a village in the fourth', they say, and the term gives some idea of the probable length of the journey.[3]

Cultivated land is divided into (*a*) *mputa*, or village mounds, a circular band about 300 yards across round the village, (*b*) *ifitemene* (sing. *icitemene*), the millet gardens which are cut in the bush each year, at first near the village and then farther and farther out until

[1] e.g. Ituna is the *icalo* of Mwamba, Icinga that of Nkula, &c.

[2] The Cimba, Munuca, Citikafula, Katenda, Cikutwe, all have this right since the sacred relics they possess are so powerful that they might harm the Paramount himself.

[3] C. Doke records the same method of measuring the journey's length among the Lamba, *The Lambas*, 1931, p. 18.

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241 .823 they lie sometimes eight or ten miles away. The word *icitemene* is derived from *kutema* (to cut down trees) and it is applied to a new millet garden in the course of being cleared and prepared for sowing. Hence Government reports now refer to the '*citemene* system' to describe the characteristic Bemba method of clearing the bush. However the garden, after it has been sown, is known as an *ubukula* (plur. *amakula*), and in its second and subsequent years of life, when it is planted with other crops, it is called an *icifwani* (plur. *ififwani*) and continues under this name until the cultivated land reverts to bush. The average size of an *ubukula* has been calculated to be about one acre, for which a strip of bush about eight acres is usually cleared of trees, but the gardens, though roughly circular, have no fixed size or shape. A smaller *ubukula* usually less than a quarter of an acre in size, such as those planted with fast-growing millet (*mwangwe*), is known as an *akakumba* (*plur. ukukumba*).

823 It will be seen, therefore, that the descriptive terms applied to land never refer to fixed units of measurement, but either to the political district in which a man lives, to a natural vegetation division in which his successive villages are usually built (*mpanga*), or to the temporary use to which the land is being put (*mputa*, *icitemene*, *icifwani*, &c.).

The Chief as Land-owner.

423 622 643 A Bemba's right to the use of any part of the bush depends upon his political allegiances, first to a headman and then to a chief. He cannot cultivate as an isolated individual, even though he has uncontested rights of ownership of any land he may have cleared. Every Bemba reckons himself the subject of a territorial chief. He calls himself the '*umwina*' (subject, connexion of, member of) such-and-such a ruler, e.g. *umwina* Citimukulu, the subject of Citimukulu or by the historic name of the *icalo* itself, *umwina* Lubemba, an inhabitant of Lubemba.[1] In the first place, then, how does his status as a subject actually determine his use of land? What right has he to select in the *icalo* of his chief a strip of bush for a village site, or for agricultural purposes?

[1] The word '*umwina*' is difficult to translate. Besides the meanings given above, husband and wife refer to each other as *umwina uandi*, 'the person connected with me, or with whom I am tied', and a football team on the copper-belt uses the word for a member of the team. It must be distinguished from *umwine*, the owner of a thing or leader of an affair.

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those with root crops. In good red loam I saw most commonly 241 the following sequence:

1st year . . .	Beans
2nd year . . .	Kaffir corn and pumpkins
3rd year . . .	Kaffir corn and pumpkins
4th year . . .	Fallow, or complete remaking of mounds before more Kaffir corn
5th year . . .	Kaffir corn

The same sequence was also found with sweet potatoes substituted for pumpkins.[1] A simpler sequence is: beans followed by maize and sweet potatoes, for as many years running as possible,[2] and the sweet potatoes are then left to ramble as they please till the village moves. Another common sequence is:

1st year . . .	Cassava and sweet potatoes
2nd year . . .	Cassava and sweet potatoes
3rd year . . .	Cassava dug up and mounds remade and more cassava planted

On poor soil I also saw:

1st year . . .	Sweet potatoes
2nd year . . .	Sweet potatoes and maize
3rd year . . .	Maize
4th year . . .	Sweet potatoes

or

1st year . . .	Beans
2nd year . . .	Sweet potatoes
3rd year . . .	" "
4th year . . .	Tobacco and pumpkins

The Bemba use of old house-sites for cultivation has already been described (p. 282), but since these sites (*ifitantala*) are often cultivated for two or three years running, this method of using refuse soil must be mentioned again under the heading of sequence of crops. The cultivation itself is simple. It consists of waiting till the house has decayed (one rainy season) and then breaking up the

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[1] Kacienja and Shimusenga, near Shiwa Ndandu, 1933. At Mungulube, a mixed Bisa and Bemba village, near Chinsali, millet was sown the fourth year on a seed-bed formed by flattening out the third-year *mputa*, and it was followed by Kaffir corn again, 1933. This was specially good soil, described as 'heavy, sticking together', and one that does not get cold quickly; one that is warm and gives off smoke'.

[2] Seen at Kungu, near Kasama, 1934.

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usually descendants of the dead chief, and directly responsible to his living successor.

(4) *Natural phenomena* (*ngulu*). Remarkable natural phenomena like big waterfalls or caves are also considered to be spirit-centres believed to have been inhabited by legendary personages, e.g. the cave under the Cishimba Waterfall near Cilubula, the Canga cave filled with bats near Kasama, a queer pointed stone in the river near Kapatu, warm springs at Mwamba Kambwale in Munkonge's country where women only may catch the fish, &c. Many of these sites are also associated with a form of snake worship, or are believed to be inhabited by a python. Battle-grounds or places where many people have been known to be killed, are also feared and believed to be haunted by spirits (e.g. Musonda Cinanda in the Chinsali district where a number of Arabs are said to have been slaughtered). All these *ngulu* sites are in charge of local *bashimapepo* acting under the orders of the chief.

(5) *Burial groves of dead chiefs* (*mwalule*). It is characteristic of the centralized government of the Bemba that their big chiefs are buried in one place—Shimwalule in the Chinsali district—while the lesser chiefs and chieftainesses are buried in the grove of Bwalya Cabala near Citimukulu's village.[1] The great grove, a place kept with great secrecy and lying at about four days' walk from the capital, is said to have the greatest *imipashi* of the land. The priest in charge, the *Shimwalule*, is himself the burier of the Citimukulu, and is in a sense the ultimate authority in the whole spiritual hierarchy since he alone can sacrifice for rain,[2] or in the old days could pray for success in war.

(6) *Sacred relic shrines* (*babenye*). The Paramount Chief, all the bigger territorial chiefs, and the most important *bakabilo*, possess relic shrines which are considered the ultimate source of their spiritual powers. These shrines are huts which resemble ordinary houses, but have their doors barred with logs or ivory tusks, and are kept with the utmost secrecy. They are hedged with taboos, and may only be entered by the chief, the 'wives of the relics' (*bamukabenye*), old women, descendants of the first chief's wives, and by the five most important *bakabilo*. They contain relics (usually stools) of the first holders of each particular title, by which the tribal spirits may be invoked. The most important religious rites of the Bemba are those by which a new Paramount acquires his

[1] Cf. pp. 240–1.

[2] Drought is very rare in this area.